

Needs dictate methods for education

By Dr. Patricia Schoelles
Courier columnist

Moral education has become a "hot topic" around the diocese, especially since the General Synod, Oct. 1-3, 1993. Ranking third among the priorities established for our diocese over the next several years, moral education is a clear concern to Catholics in our local church.

At first it may seem we all agree on what we mean by "moral education." Furthermore, some may believe that we all agree on what it ought to do for us as individuals and as a diocese. I suspect, however, that many different ideas exist "around the towns" about what constitutes moral education and what it will achieve for us and among us.

Because of conflicting definitions of moral education and different expectations about its effects, I hope we will develop many different methods as we establish the steps by which we will deliver the moral education we require.

From my own experience as a "receiver" of moral education and as one who has tried to serve as a moral educator, I have found there is no one best way to teach about the moral life. And there is no best way to learn about it. Because we move through various stages of moral development, we have different moral needs at different times in our lives. And because the issues we deal with are so varied, there simply can be no single method of moral education.

Even over the course of a lifetime, our needs in the area of moral formation can change. I think it is a mistake, for example, to assume that the moral education of children can or should take the same form as the



THE MORAL LIFE

moral education of teenagers or adults.

In the case of children, we need to convey a strong sense of clear moral limits. Because of their need for clarity and security, younger children need an unclouded sense that important rules govern our conduct, and that these rules should not be broken.

Children benefit greatly from a strict code of morality. They can understand quite early what a lie is, and can accept the notion that lying is wrong and ought to be avoided. Likewise, respect for the property rights of others and understanding that stealing is wrong "comes with the territory" of our common human existence, and rules about taking what belongs to others can be comprehended while we are still quite young.

Tremendous wisdom resides in presenting clear moral rules to children; in fact, a world without limits is undoubtedly quite a scary place to young and maturing children. Before we have achieved a certain level of ma-

turity — and for a long time afterward, too! — our own conduct remains a great mystery to us. An obvious and plain account of what stands as right or wrong behavior is very helpful for children as they go about the important tasks of learning and growing.

As the process of renewal has unfolded in our church over the last several decades, Catholics have come to recognize that the moral life means more than "keeping the rules." But as we have tried to move beyond a morality based on "rule-keeping," we may have become too enthralled with focusing on complex situations in which one does have to consider breaking an accepted rule.

Many situations are complex enough that a given moral rule may not always govern every case in exactly the same way. Moral education can take the form of considering such complex cases in which rules seem not to fit. But this is NOT the kind of moral education that is most beneficial for children. An example from my own efforts at moral education illustrates something of what I mean:

As a former grammar-school teacher, I once used a textbook that contained an exercise intended to help students identify their "values." The teacher was instructed to describe a situation in which a wagon train of U.S. pioneers was attacked by an enemy group. Two mothers in the party had crying babies, and the noise from these infants was giving away the safe hideaway of the settlers. One mother actually suffocated her child in an effort to save the entire group. The other mother allowed her child to continue crying, thus betraying the location of the wagon train and bringing about the deaths of the entire party. After describing this situation, the

teacher was directed to ask the class, "Which mother did the right thing?"

When I look back on this sort of moral education, I chuckle and vow to avoid any such thing in my future. Such an exercise may be useful in some settings, but I do not find it helpful in the moral formation of younger children. At the early stages of moral development, clear norms and rules are most helpful. Our efforts should be directed at trying to help our children realize that some matters of conduct are very serious, and that one option is not as good as another. The textbook exercise is inappropriate for children because it suggests that even important matters are "up for grabs" and that we really don't have many resources for understanding our moral actions.

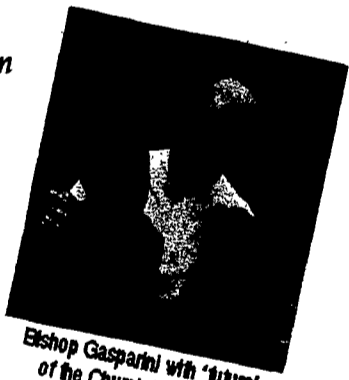
Teens and certainly Catholic adults, on the other hand, need to appreciate that the moral life, especially the Christian moral life, is not primarily a "code morality" or a matter of "keeping the rules" — although rules have an obvious role in our tradition. But we can move beyond a "rule-based morality" only after we have achieved the understanding that some matters are clearly more important than others. Indeed, attaining the maturity for more complex moral decision-making requires a long process of guidance in the rules and norms themselves.

I am confident that as our Synod process continues, we will be flexible enough to provide for our children the kind of moral education that will help them most. I am confident also that flexible programs will be necessary for older moral learners, too. A variety of educational structures and styles will surely assist all of us as we continue with our Synod implementation.

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